REMINISCENCES OF AN AMATEUR LEPIDOPTERIST, 1920-90

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1. Seaford, 1918 - 23

OUTSIDE the washroom, a line of boys passed one by one before a teacher, who daily inspected both sides of both hands of each and glanced at head and neck-wear before allowing the boy to proceed to the dining room where, together with sixty boarders, he sat down to breakfast.

Between breakfast and morning prayers, towards the end of the summer term, a smaller line of boys, budding entomologists all, queued before Mrs Caroline Trollope, the headmaster's wife. This group consisted of the envied possessors of puss-moth caterpillars (*Cerura vinula* L.).

About the age of eleven, the spirit of Nimrod, that "mighty hunter before the Lord" got into many a boy. Girls, then segregated in separate institutions, were, we understood, more liable to dream of horses or the ballet. The Sussex Downs, not far from the school, had long since lost any big game they might have had, and the sheep that safely grazed there were taboo to the only holders of small arms in Seaford, the warlike Canadians in a camp the other side of our football-field. Across the Channel, in 1918 at least, the occasional rumble of guns reached their ears . . .

There remained therefore, for boys so inspired, two possible hunting targets — birds or bugs. Andrew Harvey Trollope, our headmaster, had banned catapults, doubtless reckoning such weapons might smash his, or a neighbour's, windows, or even blind a boy in his charge. Thus by a process of elimination, the pursuit of butterflies and moths was considered by Mr and Mrs Trollope the safest diversion and one to be judiciously encouraged.

Only rarely were the boys of Tyttenhanger Lodge able to walk on the Sussex Downs. Their walks in Seaford, however, took them regularly past the privet hedges and poplars of the gardens of their own school and others. Late in the summer term Puss-moth caterpillars, with their weird fork-tails and terrifying attitudes appeared regularly on poplar leaves within reach of schoolboy fingers, and, at the start of the Michaelmas term, those of the Privet Hawk (*Sphinx ligustri* L.).

One had only to put one or more of these in a white cardboard shoebox with holes punched in the top and one hole in the bottom, through which a twig of foodplant drew up water from a receptacle. The voracious pets, growing, would strip a twig of all its leaves in twenty-four hours. Thus it was that Caroline Trollope, furnished with a number of poplar sprays picked by her gardener, dispensed them to the envied pet-breeders.

"The bigger spray, Mrs Trollope, 'cos mine is a bunjie-phizz" (by which nickname the boys distinguished the helmeted last-instar larva of *vinula*), one would say, and then: "Oh, thank you Mrs Trollope".

The sight of a large caterpillar chewing the fresh leaves was a fascinating lesson in insect morphology which drew envious groups to the class-room lockers; we would discuss and try to demonstrate what it might be like if our own jaws moved sideways instead of up and down. Once spun up in a hard cocoon, chewed out of the shoebox interior, the pet became less interesting and might even be forgotten about. Whether we succeeded in breeding it through to the winged moth or not, we had learned early how much more rewarding it was to breed up an insect than merely to kill a butterfly in a net with a neat pinch; in any case to gain possession of a killing-bottle, pins and setting-board presented insuperable difficulties at that age. There was no talk of local rarities either; almost every species was a wonder and a prize.

2. The Cotswolds (1923 - 28)

My next school was Cheltenham College. It had ten times as many boarders as Tyttenhanger Lodge. Despite its military reputation, and the sports-worship usual in such schools various extra-curricular interests were encouraged, and regular outings into the countryside for photography, or natural history, would be led by a sympathetic master. The wooded hills ringing the town, provided a wonderful introduction to the study of butterflies and moths. "Brusher" (H.F.) Jones took the "bug-hunters" under his wing and we quickly learnt the names of the fritillaries, blues, burnets, etc. The first edition of South's butterflies, p. 179 mentioned cryptic details about the Gloucestershire Large Blue (*Maculinea arion* L.) a local rarity which Jones told us was extinct in most of its former sites, such as Hilcot and Cranham Common. So our values became more sophisticated and Meadow Browns (*Maniola jurtina* L.) were soon spurned as common trash.

Amazingly, in 1926, two boys in our group, called B. Cooper and J.F. Kitching, discovered a still thriving colony of the Large Blue on a hilltop between Sheepscombe and Cranham, bringing back one or two larvae and pupae, some of which later hatched. I have preserved the detailed diary which I made during those years, and in June and July they also took the adult flying there. In the following year they hatched out a further couple, male and female, and with Jones's help endeavoured to breed from them with thyme and ants in a cage on the roof of the science laboratory.

Though I had visited the same locality in 1926 it was only in 1927 that I succeeded in finding two pupae by turning over slabs of limestone which covered some ants' nests on the flat hill-top. Two weeks later a Large Blue hatched from one of them, to become the only British example in my collection (Norwich Castle Museum).

It was, of course, a case of "beginner's luck". As a beginner, I was unaware of the fact that in the twenties various collectors knew of this and other localities for the Large Blue. For a good account of the state of

affairs in Gloucestershire those interested should refer to Muggleton, 1973 and 1974, especially the first. Russell Bretherton, from his home in Gloucester, had in fact anticipated the Cheltonian brigade in capturing the Sheepscombe Large Blue. Later, it appears, he was the last to see it flying there (in 1937) and on a war-time visit observed in 1943 that the flat hill-top had been ploughed, doubtless as part of the nation's war effort. This was doubtless the final straw in the extinction of that particular colony.

As for Jones and Cooper's breeding-cage on the roof at Cheltenham, I regret to say that a 1927 storm blew it down and the ants and butterflies either escaped or were drowned.

3. East Anglia

Cambridge, where I completed my education (1928 - 32) had several local rarities of butterfly and moth, equivalent to the Cotswold Large Blue. Two of the four butterflies, however, had become extinct (both Fenland specialities): the Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar* Haworth), since many years; and the Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon* L.) more recently; endeavours had not yet been made to replant them at Woodwalton and Wicken Fens respectively. On rising ground to the north, outside cycle range but accessible in Bernard Kettlewell's car, the Black Hairstreak, *Strymonidia pruni* L. at Warboys wood, and the Chequered Skipper, *Carterocephalus palaemon* Pallas, at Bedford Purlieus, still flew, and on 30th May 1929 with Bernard and A.E. Stubbs, I secured one or two of the latter.

As the Swallowtail still thrived in my native stamping-ground, the Norfolk Broads, its absence from Wicken, to which I cycled five times in my first summer term, did not worry me. Of the two moth prizes, the fen rarity, *Athetis pallustris* Hübner fluttered, not to my sheet, but to Demuth's; and the more urban speciality, *Cryphia muralis* ab. *impar* Warren was obtainable on our college walls. Worsley-Wood and Cockayne had bred the latter and shewn us it was conspecific with the green *muralis* forms, which on a holiday trip I found at Swanage.

However, readers can refer to Demuth's lively account (*Ent. Rec.* **96**: 264-272) of our group's doings. He and Bernard came up to Caius two years before I to Jesus, and both went down at the end of my first year. Moreover, I have published elsewhere accounts of some of my East Coast activities (Wiltshire 1979a) and some of the Cambridge scene too (Wiltshire 1979b); such details can be omitted here.

That year I was a typical case of bug-virus-infection, for my dear mother in her innocence told some bridge pals at Gorleston-on-Sea that I was a very keen bugger. They were respectable ladies and perhaps equally innocent; for they showed no shock at my mother's misleading terminology.

The precarious survival in the British Isles of species numerous and widespread in many parts of Europe, their curious isolation in endangered

wetland or maritime localities, enhanced the value of every new specimen in the eyes of both amateur and professional British lepidopterist; and old specimens, if authenticated as British, went for comparatively large sums at London auctions. Untrained professionals were beyond the pale in our eyes; were they not reputed to have decimated the local rarities in their British sites and to try to swindle rich amateurs by relabelling European examples? Nor were we attracted by the prospect of a career as an "applied entomologist" but we met such, as were attracted and studying zoology rather than medicine or the arts, amicably enough in meetings of the entomological section of the university Natural History Society.

Only a few speakers at these meetings had any inkling of the fascination of the exotic butterfly scene; one such, whom I remember, being the young O.W. Richards, just home from Trinidad, who described the Neotropical scene and its Morphos and spoke of the rich upper canopy layers of the rain forests. I forget the name of one dull but mature speaker who summed up the branches of entomology which were then opening to those with such ambitions, and who stated that physiology and biochemistry were the disciplines to acquire, rather than taxonomy. The basic task of classification had been completed, and in the brave new world we did not question this comforting assertion. To our group, with access to excellent pocket handbooks facilitating identification, it seemed plausible enough. Later, however, I found that revision after revision and descriptions of many new species yearly kept appearing, through the next six decades, and much of the old taxonomy framework was questioned; and I noticed that adepts in applied entomology came cap in hand to Museum taxonomists hardly numerous enough to perfect the taxonomy they professed; in any case, a new branch of taxonomy, called cladism, with brand new terminology and a laborious new procedure, has made their old tasks no easier, especially as a last decade of economy and staff cuts confounded them, even driving them to publicised strikes. Recently the time-sanctified usage "British Museum (Natural History)" sank to a junior synonym "The Natural History Museum" (a vernacular name favoured by politicians). *Plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose,* one might quote, but perhaps these trends point to an imminent transformation into a Disneyland, where a quacking Donald Dodo will welcome those willing to pay to see the facade behind which still lurk treasures and unique types, the cynosure of the world's scientists.

Little did Bernard Kettlewell and I imagine that we would, thirty years later, meet and bug-hunt in Darwin's neotropical forests, of which Richards spoke. There will be a later place for reminiscences of his visit to Rio, where I was Consul, 1958-63.

After that first year, I stopped rowing on the Cam and suspended the pursuit of the local bug, while continuing theatre-going and listening to music. My surplus energies were diverted to contributing to and sub-editing

the undergraduate weekly journal *The Granta* and participating in the earliest productions and south-coast tours of Meldrum and Cooke's Mummers, which encouraged undergraduate females to act. The bug-virus was suppressed, but persisted.

At the end of my third year, the deepening economic depression made future jobs a problem for graduates. A plutocrat uncle, if you had one, might still open a door into some trade or industry, but otherwise there seemed to be but two options: passing the Home or Indian civil service exam, or becoming a schoolmaster. Despite all extra-curricular diversions, I had dutifully pursued my classical studies as far as gaining a degree with honours but for my fourth year I added French, German and Italian and Economics, with a view to service overseas, and in 1932 just scraped into the Consular service, sitting with seven hundred other candidates.

In those days of privilege, before economy cuts in the service had been heard of, and before consuls and diplomats became targets for kidnappers or bombs, this was an attractive prospect, at least to me. Had I gone straight to New York, would I have gone on with the lepidoptera? Being informed that I was to proceed to Beirut, in the Lebanon (a French mandate at that time) I debated with my old Cambridge mentor, Worsley Wood, of what use a killing-bottle, a net and South's three little volumes would be there. Wood suggested I look for the four volumes of Seitz on Palaearctic lepidoptera in a London second-hand book-store.

Foyles, in Charing Cross Road, was then rather different from what it is today. There were stacks of large and learned old books in fair condition at reasonable prices. Ten pounds sufficed to acquire the four tomes suggested by Wood. They are still on my shelves today, with the subsequently appearing supplementary volumes, each one worth more than the price I paid for all four, despite constant use during the forty or fifty years that have passed since their purchase second-hand.

So it was that in November 1932 I sailed on a P.& O. liner from Tilbury to Port Said with four hefty volumes of Seitz and a butterfly net in my luggage. My main purpose was to learn Arabic and become a full Vice-Consul; but I had this hobby in reserve.

References (Parts 1-3)

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4. First steps in the Middle East.

At Beirut I learnt that I was not the first British Vice-Consul to take an interest in Lebanese butterflies. Robert Eldon Ellison had preceded me by about three years, and in a less junior capacity. He was now in Morocco and kindly wrote to me with instructions where to find the most interesting butterflies, including the very local blue which he had discovered on the highest mountain in the country and was now known as *Albulina ellisoni* Pfeiffer. He assured me that if I climbed the Cedar Mountain to a height of six thousand feet I would find the rare "Ellison's Blue" in fair numbers, and nowhere else in the world.

This put the rare Large Blue of the Cotswold in a new perspective, for that species, however local and rare in England, extended, as I now realise, from Western Europe to the Far East.

I made friends with a young French archaeologist who was also a skiing pioneer in the Lebanon and frequently visited this "Cedar Mountain" in North Lebanon in winter, as it had the best slopes for his sport. Of course this was long before the first ski-lifts were built either in Europe or the Lebanon. In would take him about four hours trudging up hill, with skis on, to reach the high point at about ten thousand feet, where his descent began, which he would perform in about ten minutes. He assured me I would have no difficulty in summer in reaching that height, as in fact Ellison had already done.

On 14th July 1934, therefore (my second year in the Lebanon, as it happened) I left the Cedars Hotel at Bsherreh, and started trudging up the zigzag path, admiring the local flora on the way. Halfway up I met the only person on the mountain, a shepherd who obligingly milked one of his goats to quench my thirst. These animals were browsing on the steep slopes where little vegetation higher than a few inches from the ground was to be seen, except for masses of a pale-leaved vetch, whose taste the goats evidently disliked. I assumed that Ellison's Blue had been feeding on these, as it flew commonly up there. As for catching the special high mountain moths, I contented myself with bottling those attracted to the hotel lights. In sub-tropical climates the mountains high enough to receive snow are inhabited by a special flora and fauna, isolated from the lower slopes and plains climatically.

About thirty years later I again mounted to this summit, and in the company of Dr Lionel Higgins and his wife Nesta, but this time we mounted by ski-lift. A little lower down, for he descended on foot, Lionel was delighted to find Ellison's Blue in abundance, in fact right down to the cedar grove which was full of attractive herbs protected from the goats by a stone wall and a kind of religious taboo, useful for conservation, for they were known to the local Maronites as "The Lord's Cedars" (Arz-el-Rabb).

(To be continued)